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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 009145

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SUBJECT: FRANCE AND THE INDIAN OCEAN STATES

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The standoff in 2002 between Marc Ravalomanana and Didier Ratsiraka following the disputed election in Madagascar was a serious political crisis for the government of France, exposing divisions between the MFA and the presidency. With the crisis resolved, France's attention to the Indian Ocean states is largely focused on economic and development issues, in large part resulting from the proximity of the French territories of Mayotte and Reunion to the Comoros and Seychelles respectively. END SUMMARY.

#### MADAGASCAR

2. (C) The French response to the Madagascar crisis during the first six months of 2002 revealed a relatively rare glimpse of inter-agency rivalry within the GOF, specifically between the MFA and the Presidency. The crisis produced a notable casualty when Michel Dupuch, President Chirac's advisor on African affairs resigned his position July 5 following then-FM de Villepin's travel to Antananarivo to confer French recognition on Marc Ravalomanana. Although the crisis straddled the change of leadership at the MFA following French elections in April 2002, the MFA recognized early in the crisis that Ravalomanana was likely to emerge victorious from the standoff with Didier Ratsiraka. However, at the Presidency Dupuch, and possibly Chirac himself, were unwilling to dump Ratsiraka. The stated reason was that France (and the U.S.) should not get ahead of the OAU, which was reluctant to accept Ravalomanana's victory. It is also likely that decades of personal contact and friendship between Chirac and Ratsiraka also played a role in the Elysee's disinclination to support Ravalomanana. If Dupuch was the loser, Stanislas de Laboulaye, who was the French Ambassador during the crisis, and reportedly argued in favor of accepting Ravalomanana's victory, was a winner. Following French recognition of Ravalomanana in July 2002, Villepin appointed Laboulaye (an ENA classmate) as the MFA political director (P-equivalent), a post he still occupies. Meanwhile, Ratsiraka is in exile in the Paris suburbs, apparently on the condition that he "behave," i.e., that there be no repetition of the June 2002 chartered flight carrying twelve mercenaries destined for Madagascar, which obliged Villepin to intercede with the government of Tanzania to ensure that they were turned around in Dar es Salaam.

3. (C) With 24,000 French nationals (60 per cent of whom are dual nationals) in Madagascar, the GOF is doubtless pleased to have moved beyond the crisis. France has made efforts to establish a working relationship with Ravalomanana, notwithstanding initial concerns about his and his supporters' religious fervor, his lack of fluency in French and his origins as a businessman. The French were pleased to see Ravalomanana attend the France/Africa summit in France in February 2003 and again in August this year to commemorate the 60th anniversary of allied landings in southern France. Chirac will attend the summit of Indian Ocean states in March in Antananarivo, having already been to Madagascar, stopping in Antananarivo in July this year in conjunction with his summer vacation. The MFA claims that Ravalomanana has joined other Chirac friends such as Gabon's Bongo and Congo/B's Sassou as recipients of Chirac's warm embraces. The MFA views the situation for Ravalomanana's TIM party and its allies as fragile, but notes that notwithstanding traditional Malagasy views about land, the GOM has taken courageous steps in creating conditions for foreign ownership.

#### COMOROS

4. (C) The GOF is supportive of a Federal structure for the Comoros under the Fomboni accords, as exemplified by the refusal of French ministers to meet with Anjouan President Mohammed Bacar during his visits to Paris. The GOF has been discouraging Bacar's desire for an independent Anjouan and views him as overly authoritarian. Unfortunately for France, they find the Federal government incompetent, not even able to produce a budget for review by the IMF. About the only thing the government can do, an MFA contact told us, is to pursue Comoros' territorial claim to Mayotte. MFA contacts occasionally remind us that Comoros is the closest African country to France, just over 100 miles from the French territory of Mayotte (claimed by Comoros). They express concern about the strong presence of Madrasa schools established by individuals coming from Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Pakistan, which preach extreme pro-Islamic, anti-western

tenets to Comorian youth. France is also concerned about trafficking of goods and money laundering in the Comoros as well as "boat people" seeking to flee to Mayotte. The MFA claims that there are 40,000 clandestine Comorians in Mayotte and that 70 per cent of the births in Mayotte are to Comorian mothers. The GOF is concerned about the drain on welfare resources caused by these illegal immigrants and the growth of violence, including by vigilante groups against the Comorians.

#### MAURITIUS

15. (C) MFA contacts told us in February 2004 that the visit to France of Mauritian PM Paul Berenger had gone very well. They noted with satisfaction that FM Cuttaree did not share the anti-French sentiments of his predecessor Anil Gayan. French interests in Mauritius are essentially economic (given Mauritian engagement on WTO issues) and commercial, although both countries are engaged on the issue of Comoros.

#### SEYCHELLES

16. (C) After 27 years of rule by Albert Rene, new President James Michel is relatively unknown to the French. The GOF sees much of the Seychelles' economy dominated by Rene cronies, with the majority of Seychellois economically marginalized. France views the economic situation in the Seychelles as very bad, with almost all commerce under the control of the Seychelles Marketing Board. The MFA drew an analogy with Cuba, saying that there were constant food shortages. The French also have concerns about the political situation, fearing that elections scheduled for 2006 will go badly.  
Wolff